

Knowing From Within: Using Autoethnography as a Lens to Examine Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone living in the United States has likely been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It upended social life in 2020, and its impact continues to be felt. The pandemic has not, however, affected all people in the same way and, therefore, sociologists are working to uncover the diversity of lived experiences during COVID-19. This study aims to contribute to that developing body of knowledge.

This research is an autoethnography, a first-hand narrative of the author's lived experiences, that draws on feminist theory, specifically standpoint theory and the validity of subjective knowledge, to examine life during the pandemic. The autoethnography is structured around original photographs, serving to reveal and analyze challenges faced by a female undergraduate navigating life amid a worldwide pandemic. Together, the written and visual elements create a narrative of the knowledge acquired through the self-examination of one's experiences using a sociological lens

THEORY AND LITERATURE

Dorothy Smith (1990) argues that our understanding of society comes from ruling texts composed by men. These texts are treated as objective knowledge, while narratives of female and non-binary persons have been dismissed as subjective and less valid. Feminist theory utilizes qualitative methods to capture these long-excluded perspectives. Autoethnography creates knowledge through the sharing of personal experiences (Wall 2008). Photography enables one to create a personal visual narrative, regardless of gender or age (Harper 2000). The integration of autoethnography and photography allows one to bridge the gap between researcher and participant.

Smith (1990:22) states, "The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within." By critically considering the researcher's personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences, this work aims to contribute to the ongoing sociological conversation about the validity and importance of sharing subjective knowledge. This autoethnography combines with photography to create a space for the researcher to sociologically examine her standpoint as a female undergraduate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

Writing this autoethnography, I combined my love of photography with a sociological examination of my lived experiences. Through the process, I learned the value and validity of "knowing from within." Before entering university, I seldom valued my personal experiences as a source of knowledge, because much of what I had previously read was written from a male perspective, presented to me as objective and unbiased. Through this research project, however, I have become aware that critically considering my own journey as a female undergraduate is equally valuable for building knowledge.



Figure 1: Uncertainty

"Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and before I knew it the quarter was coming to an end...Trying to design and carry out a sociological project during a pandemic is quite tricky, especially with no research experience. I constantly found myself second-guessing my abilities, feeling like a failure. I worried Dr. Savage might realize I was incapable of living up to the expectations we both had for the project..."

Figure 2: Feelings of Inadequacy

"For as long as I can remember, I have turned to the women in my life, specifically my older sisters, for guidance and security. On a quiet afternoon in the park, I expressed my fears of being inadequate in academia; Jordan too shared that she struggled with similar fears in the corporate world. Though in different stages of life, as women, we both worry that our work is unappreciated, undervalued, and maybe, not good enough."



Figure 3: The Absence of Touch

"My mother's hands have always been there when I needed them...When I felt sick, they offered a comforting touch; if I was worried, they provided relief and security. Sitting in the corner of a hospital room, feeling helpless, I wanted to grab her hand and give her the reassurance she would give me if roles were reversed...I wanted to be strong for her, but lacked the capacity to do so."

Figure 4: Closed Doors

"For the past three years, I passed by Dr. Savage's office every day; it had become a place for guidance and conversation...There was always a sense of comfort associated with the door being open. Prior to the pandemic, this door symbolized education, opportunities, motivation, and inspiration. But for months now, the door has remained closed...Though I feel like I am missing out, I believe the door will open again."



FIGURES 1-4: Selected Photographs and Excerpts from Autoethnography

KEY FINDINGS

By documenting and reflecting on my life as a female undergraduate during the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered themes of uncertainty, inadequacy, doubt, and separation and have explored their impact on my life. These themes will resonate with some people, validating their own experiences. Others with divergent experiences will be able to learn from the knowledge I gained from within. Sharing what I have learned highlights the importance and validity of subjective knowledge as a way to learn about oneself and the lived experiences of others.



Photograph 5: Perseverance

"Watching the girl zoom through the frame of my camera symbolized persevering in its most natural form. She did not stop, she kept going. Capturing the woman zooming by, even if I only captured a glimmer of her, gave me a strange sense of hope. When things began to feel impossible or overwhelming, I knew I needed to keep moving forward. The girl on the bike, like me, was not giving up....as the sign says, WE WILL PERSEVERE!"

CONCLUSION

This study adds to our understanding of life during the COVID-19 pandemic and showcases the ongoing need to make space for subjective narrative in sociological research. The project highlights the importance of sharing knowledge from one's standpoint, thereby providing a model of what autoethnography as a method can uncover about social life.

SELECT CITATIONS

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